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## THE PERFECTION OF THE DECALOGUE.

By TALBOT W. CHAMBERS, D. D.,

New York City.

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We read in the nineteenth Psalm, "The law of Jehovah is perfect," and this is exactly and literally true. It is therefore an exception to what generally obtains in this world. All men acquiesce in the couplet of Pope,

"Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see,  
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be,"

which simply reiterates what was said two thousand years before in Holy Writ, "I have seen an end of all perfection." But as the same writer proceeds immediately to say, "Thy commandment is exceeding broad." Incompleteness belongs to all the works of man, but the work of God is like himself perfect, and that not in the sense conveyed in the well-known verse of the poet-laureate:

"Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null,"

but in the higher sense of being in substance, form, expression and tone, exactly adapted to its purpose. This has been denied, not only by avowed enemies of our holy religion, but even by some who minister acceptably at its altar. The subject, therefore, is worthy of consideration. The purpose of the ten commandments was to reveal a rule of duty for men, and this we insist was accomplished in a way that leaves nothing to desire. The truth may be shown,

### I. By the *Nature of the Law itself.*

Its contents are just what they ought to be. They enjoin only what is right; they forbid only what is wrong. They err neither in excess nor in defect. No error or incongruity can be detected from beginning to end. The ground that is covered takes in all the relations and interests of man, the recognition, the worship, the reverence, and the proportion of time he owes to God, all relative duties arising from the family, the household and the state, the regard due to the life, the domestic circle, the property and the good name of one's neighbor; and then the whole winds up with a precept that shows that thought as well as speech and act is included in the obligation. No modern theory of practical ethics discloses any duty which is not contained in the Sinaitic summary. That summary is suited to all lands, all races, all times, all states of society. It contains nothing that is sectional, or national, or fortuitous, or temporary. The fifth commandment may seem an exception, because the promise attached to it mentions "the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee," whence some have rashly inferred that the whole decalogue was simply a Jewish statute and destitute of universal significance and applicability. But the impropriety of this inference is shown by the language of the Apostle Paul in the opening of the sixth chapter of his Epistle to the Ephesians. Writing to a Gentile church nearly all whose members were of heathen origin (cf. ii. 11-13; iv. 17-19), he enforces the duty of children to their parents by citing this precept, altering the last clause so that it reads, "and thou mayest live long upon the earth," thus clearly teaching that the reference to the Holy Land in the original statute was a provisional feature which in no degree

limited or impaired the world-wide and perpetual scope of the obligation. It is clear, therefore, that the code is addressed to man as man every-where and always. It lays hold of Jew and Greek, Barbarian and Scythian, male and female, bond and free, high and low, all nations, all classes without exception; for whatever other differences obtain, all stand upon the same footing as rational, responsible beings, and alike need some authoritative directory of conduct.

But, while the code is thus comprehensive and far-reaching, it is also succinct and brief, as a manual always should be. It resolves human duty into its constituent elements, and then sums up these elements into a decade of precepts whose force is not to be mistaken. Obedience to parents, the very earliest of earthly obligations, stands for the whole series of relative duties. And rightly, for the good child will naturally be the good husband, and master, and citizen. Nor is it conceivable that one relation should be defined and cared for, while others, equally natural and permanent and general, should be neglected. In like manner when the code takes up the rights of man in society, the leading overt act of gross transgression is selected and specified, because the prohibition of it means the prohibition of all lesser forms of the same sin. And the last precept lays particular stress upon the heart, out of which are the issues of life. Thus there is provided a *vade mecum* of the most satisfactory kind. A little summary having no more parts than can be counted on the fingers of both hands contains the whole substance of the moral law. It realizes the proverbial saying, "The Iliad in a nutshell." A child can easily learn it by heart. A man can recall its precepts anywhere. It is a portable manual always available. As a summation of ethics it has never been surpassed save once, and then it was by its divine author—when our Lord, in answer to the question of a lawyer (Matt. xxii. 37-40), compressed the ten commandments into two. Apart from this most felicitous condensation, the decalogue remains the briefest, clearest and most complete statement of human duty the world has ever seen.

But the order in which its precepts are arranged is as remarkable as their nature. The two tables treat first of what belongs to God, then of what is due to man, with the clear implication not only that the former is superior to the latter, but also that it is the basis upon which it rests. Ethics, so far from being a substitute for religion, is its offspring and dependant. The first table begins with the ultimate fact of the divine existence, then prescribes the way in which God is to be worshiped, next the reverence with which every manifestation of his nature is to be regarded, after which comes the period of time to be consecrated to his service, and the duty which is due to those who are God's representatives on earth, whether parents or other superiors. The second table begins with life, because the dead have no more to do with earth, and then, after this most necessary provision, guards personal purity and the integrity of the domestic circle, after which comes the right of property, a right so nearly connected in all lands and ages with the preservation of social order. This is followed by a guaranty for the maintenance of truth and charity of speech, and the whole concludes with a precept that shows that in all cases it is not so much external obedience as the state of the heart that is required. Now this arrangement of the divine commands is the best conceivable. It could hardly be altered in the least without injury. It puts first what is first in reality. The claims of God transcend those of all his creatures, and attention to these is a condition precedent to the discharge of all other duties. If experience teaches anything, it is that a divine

sanction is indispensable to a proper and permanent restraint upon human conduct. To love God is the first and great commandment. In like manner the second table proceeds, taking up in turn the chief social obligations of mankind, and riveting them all by a final precept which lays its firm grasp upon the inner man of the heart.

Once more, the perfection of the decalogue may be argued from its manifest reasonableness. If there be no God, then religion does not exist, and it is folly to talk of sacred precepts; but if there be a God, the maker of heaven and earth, and sole ruler of the children of men, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, then the duties prescribed in the first table are due unto him. Nothing less can meet his exalted claims. Every feeling of propriety and gratitude summons us to render to him love, honor, reverence, worship and obedience. And so with the other part of the Ten Words. If men be a race, if they have sprung from a common ancestor, if they are of one blood, if they are linked together, not casually or temporarily, but by a bond of nature, then beyond question they owe to each other all that the second table enjoins. They are members one of another, and as such must be governed invariably by the law of love. There is nothing arbitrary or capricious in any precept. All spring from a common source, and are self-commended by their bearing upon human welfare. And as far as the decalogue is obeyed in its spirit, just so far is earth made to resemble heaven.

But the decalogue is no exception to the rule that in this world nothing human or divine escapes criticism, and accordingly fault has been found with it, and sometimes even by those who are within the Christian pale. People have tried to identify it with the moral character of the people to whom it was first given, just as if it were a natural development of the human faculties instead of being a descent from above just as really as the "great sheet let down from heaven by four corners," which Peter saw at Joppa. Its constant claim is that it came to man, not from him. It expresses, therefore, not the moral ideas which he has attained, but those which are held by his Maker and by him put into the form of a statute.

(1) Of the older class of objections the most common is that no provision has anywhere been made for friendship or the love of country. But the former is not properly a subject of legislation, nor could its terms or degrees be intelligently prescribed. In itself it is a felicity rather than a duty, and it is more properly to be placed among the rewards of moral excellence than among its obligations. Indeed, the moment it is made a duty, the fine aroma of the relation exhales, and its chief charm disappears. Its whole value lies in its spontaneous character. As for the duty of patriotism that may be safely left to the action of natural causes. Experience shows that the great danger here is, not that men will fail in love of their country, but that they will become so absorbed in it as to forget the rights of individuals and the immutable claims of humanity and justice. And when patriotism is pampered to excess it ceases to be a virtue, and is rather "the bond and cement of a guilty confederation." Nor if the relative duties (of rulers and ruled), fairly implied in the fifth commandment, are faithfully discharged by each party, is there any reason to fear that men will fall short of the attachment to their country which is universally recognized as appropriate and becoming. The law, therefore, without enjoining the duty, lays the basis for its rational and consistent exercise.

(2) The Rev. R. W. Dale, in his excellent little work on the Ten Commandments, says that they "were not intended to constitute a complete code of morals. There are many sins which they do not condemn, and there are many virtues which they do not enforce. The symmetrical completeness of human systems of ethics is not to be found either in the Old Testament or the New; and certainly we have no right to expect that these laws, given to a race which must have suffered the gravest moral injury from protracted slavery to a heathen nation, should cover the whole ground of moral duty." If this be so, it is very singular that, while almost everything else in Judaism has become obsolete, this code has kept, and still keeps, its place in the theology, the catechisms, and the ritual, of the Christian world. The whole church cannot have been mistaken for eighteen centuries. The omissions which some detect are seeming rather than real. It is true that the second table contains only a series of naked prohibitions, but the principle underlying these negations sweeps the whole field of human duty. The inward and spiritual character of the morality here enjoined is made abundantly plain by the closing precept, which casts its piercing light upon all that precedes. It does not annex any additional province of obligation, but affirms that the law covers every movement of the mind, as well as the actions of the body, and brings the whole man, inner and outer, under the sway of duty. It was this tenth commandment that wrought a spiritual revolution in the soul of the great apostle (Rom. vii. 7), and led him to the true experimental knowledge of his natural condition and character. Nor was this due to any strained application of the words, but rather to the strict and natural interpretation of their meaning. Moreover, when the rich young ruler came to our Lord with the weighty question, "What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" the plain categorical answer was, "If thou wouldest enter into life keep the commandments." Now it is impossible to explain or justify this answer save on the principle that the commandments comprehended all human duty. It is true that the subsequent words of the Saviour show that he intended to convince the amiable ruler of his self-ignorance, and bring him to a proper sense of sin; but this fact in no way lessens the intrinsic force of his declaration as to the weight and significance of the decalogue.

(3) The Rev. Dr. Dykes, in his "The Law of the Ten Words," speaks of this code as being of a "juvenile or primary character," and says that its "requirements are concrete, and expressed in a negative or prohibitory form," and insists upon the fact "that the sanction of the decalogue was fear," as if there could be a law without such a sanction. Yet he claims for it "an admirable breadth and massiveness," and says that "it succeeds in sweeping the whole field of duty," which is just what this paper insists upon. His book closes with a chapter upon the "uses and defects of the law," which is very unhappily named, for it is not shown that there are any defects in the law; nay, the exact contrary is stated, viz., that it is a pure transcript of the divine holiness. It did not restore spiritual life to fallen men, but the reason of this lay not in any shortcomings in the Ten Words, but in the hopelessly injured condition of man himself. It follows, then, that however ineffectual the law is as a means of saving men, it is absolutely without spot as a rule of duty. How, indeed, could it be otherwise, since it is simply an expression of the nature of God in the form of moral requirement, and a necessary expression of that nature in view of the existence of moral

beings? Law, according to Julius Müller, is simply rectitude embodied in the form of command.

(4) Again, it has sometimes been objected to the completeness of the decalogue that there are many things binding upon us which, without a further revelation of the will of God, we should never have known to be obligatory. The great duty of men under the Gospel is faith, as our Lord said, "This is the work of God that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." And the whole Scripture is filled with exhortations of every kind to repent; yet there is not a word of this in the ten commandments. The answer is that no law makes provision for its own violation save in the way of penalty. When it declares clearly and sufficiently what is duty, and annexes an appropriate sanction, its function is ended. If a remedial system be introduced, that is an act of sovereignty which carries with it its own conditions, but in no respect interferes with or derogates from the original statute. The law which the sinner has broken holds its primeval character, and it is still true that perfect compliance with its enactments is perfect compliance with the will of God and needs no supplement of any kind or from any source.

(5) It has been said that while the Ten Words deal well and fully with our duty to our neighbor, they omit the consideration of our duty towards ourselves; and the Bishop of Carlisle, in a sermon before the university of Oxford, said that the criticism might be a true one. Is it so? Nay, on the contrary, is it not clear that men are so closely interlinked together in the whole circle of their relations and interests, that he who performs his duty to his Maker and to his fellows must needs perform whatever obligations he owes to himself? The latter may be comprehended in self-support, self-defense, self-control and self-culture. Yet every one of these, besides being involved in the nature of man as a moral and responsible being, is necessarily secured by the discharge of his duty as laid down in the decalogue. If he does not support himself, then he takes that support wrongfully from others? If he does not control himself, how can he avoid sin against others? If he does not train his own body, mind and heart, how can he perform properly his part in society? The objection is purely fanciful. Duties to one's self are most surely fulfilled when they are considered as parts of what a man owes to other beings, and there is no need of their being put in a distinct category.

## II. By Comparison with *Ethnic Statutes*.

But excellent as the decalogue is in its own nature, our conceptions of its merits are greatly exalted by comparing it with the moral law of other religious systems. Nowhere is there to be found a compact, orderly and comprehensive statement of practical ethics such as is contained in the Ten Words. The most important relic of the literature of ancient Egypt is the Book of the Dead, which treats of the beatification of the departed, and represents it in the form of certain recitations made by the deceased person himself in the nether world. The 125th chapter of this book is said by LePage Renouf to be the oldest known code of private and public morality. In it the person who enters into the hall of the Two-fold Maāt recites the sins of which he claims not to have been guilty. The list of these sins runs up to forty-two, and it includes crimes of theft, fraud, falsehood, oppression, violence, evil-speaking, and the like, so as in some measure to justify M. Lenormant in ascribing to the Egyptians "a refined morality." But these

sins are not catalogued according to any scientific arrangement. There is a great deal of repetition, and no classification. Sins of omission as well as of commission are mentioned, and those of the mind as well as those of the body; yet there is no discrimination of these from the violation of mere police regulations for public order. Similar statements are found in inscriptions upon the tombs so abundant in the Nile valley, and in various papyri which *Ægyptologists* have brought to light. But nowhere do we find a manual for popular use giving in condensed form the substance of religious and moral duties. Nothing in the shape of such a code has been discovered. The wisdom of the Egyptians was proverbial in Scripture (1 Kgs. iv. 30) and elsewhere, but it did not suffice to give them either a sensible mode of worship or a coherent and authoritative rule of daily life. No inscription and no papyrus has yet disclosed any parallel to the utterance from Sinai.

The same difficulty confronts us when we pass over to India, and consult the ancient records of Brahmanism. Here we have a renowned law-book, known as *The Institutes of Menu*. Its contents are very varied, extending from a system of cosmogony at the beginning, to the doctrine of transmigration of souls and final beatitude at the end. Several of its twelve books treat of duties, and one sets forth private morals. And scattered through the pages are found many admirable sentiments; but there are just as many, if not far more, of an opposite character. What, however, concerns us is that there is no comprehensive summary of faith and duty, nothing that formulates principles, or suggests a moral system. Physics, metaphysics, education, government, diet, caste, social life, asceticism, penance and abstinence, are all treated upon the same plane and as of equal importance. The killing of a cow is a sin to be atoned for by severe penances. He who strikes a Brahman must remain in hell a thousand years. Benevolent falsehood (e. g., to save an innocent man from a tyrant) is a venial sin. No religious rite is allowed to a woman apart from her husband. A thousand such statements as these occur in the book, nor is there any discrimination as to their relative dignity and usefulness. A cento of just and important rules might be collected from its pages, but they never were collected, nor were the Hindus ever favored with any brief compend which might be brought into comparison with the Ten Words of Moses.

Quite the contrary is the case with the other Indian religion or philosophy which for a time shared with Brahmanism the confidence of the people, Buddhism. There was a period when it was dominant in the peninsula, but in the seventh century it began to decline, and in the seventeenth it was extinct, although in the coterminous regions it still prevails and counts three or four hundred millions of adherents. As it is a religion without God, if the paradox be allowable, it lays great stress upon all kinds of moral duties. The great object of human desire and effort is Nirvana, the precise nature of which need not be discussed here. The theoretical way to Nirvana consists of eight steps, which I need not stay to particularize. The chief ethics of the system lies in certain commands or "precepts of aversion," which are exactly ten in number. Five of these are of universal obligation, and five apply only to the monks, i. e., the clergy of the system, for all its priests are monks, taking the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. What now are these precepts? First, do not kill; second, do not steal; third, do not commit adultery; fourth, do not lie; fifth, do not become intoxicated. The second pentad is, first, abstain from food out of season, i. e., after midday; second, abstain from dances, singing and theatrical representa-

tions; third, abstain from ornaments and perfumes; fourth, abstain from a lofty and luxurious couch; fifth, abstain from taking any gold or silver. Here, now, is fair room for comparison. Of the first pentad, four are rules which exactly answer to the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth commands of the decalogue, but the fifth prohibits simply one form of sensual indulgence, which, however gross and irrational and even bestial as it is, does not head any distinct category of morals, and is itself fairly included in the scope of the first precept which, forbidding the taking of life, forbids whatever carnal habits tend in that direction. But what shall be said of the second series, which concerns those who have embraced the religious life and laboriously seek the chief good? How puerile they are! How unspiritual and formal! Whatever claim may be made for a "comparatively pure and elevated morality" in the teachings of Buddha, it must be admitted that the ten precepts of aversion cut but a sorry figure beside the ten commandments of Scripture. The resemblance in four precepts only renders the difference in the other six the more striking. Buddhism has its good points, some of which are very admirable, but as a system it falls far short of truth and propriety. It furnishes no convenient manual which is suited to all places, all times and all classes, and which if obeyed from the heart leaves nothing to desire.

If we turn to ancient Greece, there is no name among lawgivers that stands so high as that of Solon. So confused and variant are the accounts that we have of him that it is hard to say how much is mythical and how much is historical; and modern writers have come to the conclusion that it was the habit of the Attic writers to attribute to him every piece of wise legislation the precise authorship of which they were unable to discover. But for our purpose the exact truth upon this point is of no moment. The Solonian legislation took in a wide range. It limited estates, classified citizens according to their income, encouraged agriculture, regulated marriage, provided for the transmission of property by will, put honor upon industry, checked luxury, forbade evil-speaking; indeed, extended to almost every subject of social importance. But we look in vain for any short, compendious summation of duty. Some remarkable utterances of his have come down the stream of tradition, but nothing that can be compared with the decalogue, or that can for a moment be considered as taking its place. The best wisdom of enlightened Greece in this respect fell far behind what had been received and adopted ages before in Judea.

The case is somewhat different when we pass to the literature of the other classic race, the Latins. Here we find in existence, at an early period (462 B. C.), a series of statutes engraved on bronze tablets, which were twelve in number, and hence gave name to the code as the *Twelve Tables* (*Lex Duodecim Tabularum*). These were praised by Livy as the fountain of public and private law, and Cicero (*de Orat.*, I., 44) pronounced them incredibly superior to the jurisprudence of any other people. They are no longer extant in their entirety, so that their contents as a whole and even their order and arrangement are unknown. Our knowledge is gained from those portions which were quoted by jurists and others. From these fragments it appears that the first three tables treated of judicial proceedings, the fourth of the paternal power, the fifth of wills and succession, the sixth of property and possession, the seventh of buildings and fields, the eighth of injuries to person or property, from which a right of compensation arose, the ninth of public and political law, the tenth of sacred rites and observances, while the eleventh and twelfth were supplementary to the others. This, it must be acknowl-

edged, was a code of extraordinary completeness and excellence, and it must have had vast influence in forming that peculiar character which enabled the Romans, after conquering the world by arms, every-where to organize it by law. Yet it was only civil and political. It regulated the outward and not the inward. It announced no principles, and rested upon no supernatural authority, but so far as appears, simply put into statute form what had been already the consuetudinary law of the Latin race.

It may then be fairly claimed that the decalogue stands alone in the literature of the world. Whether we go to the west or to the farthest east, nowhere is there found anything approaching it in correctness and completeness as a standard of human duty. All rivals fall short either in excess or in defect. They are vague, or inaccurate, or confused. They mingle the trivial with the important, or they confuse ethics with politics or economics. They overlook the state of the heart, and they omit to ground their precepts either in right reason or the will of the supreme lawgiver. In distinction from all these, the Ten Words stand out as a clean-cut manual, resolving all duty into its essential principles, stating these with the utmost precision and clearness, and basing them upon the nature and perfections of the ever-living God. As has well been said, "There is contained in this short summary the outline of all treatises on morality and all codes of justice. Not the least blemish of any vicious or barbarous legislation is mingled with it. The form is Hebrew, national; but the truth is as broad as human life, and fitted to the wants of the race. If we compare this code with the remains of other ancient peoples, with the code of Menu, the sacred books of China, the fragments of the Persian religion, there is nothing like it."

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## THE PENTATEUCH QUESTION,—RECENT PHASES.

BY PROF. HENRY P. SMITH, D. D.,

Lane Theological Seminary, Cincinnati, O.

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While the school of Wellhausen in general seems determined to adhere to its theory of the late date (post-exilic) of the Priest Code, and consequently of the redaction of the Pentateuch, there are not wanting signs of a reaction.

The first of these is a notice by Baethgen of Finsler's attack on Wellhausen.<sup>1</sup> Although the reviewer finds that "the fortress cannot be carried without heavier artillery than is at Finsler's disposal," he yet pronounces the attack a severe one, and himself supports it by contributions of his own. He asserts, for example, that there are passages in the earlier literature (before the exile) which show acquaintance with A (the first Elohist). He believes, further, that the comparison of Israel with other nations does not show the order of development assumed by Wellhausen. "According to Wellhausen, the notion of sin and guilt was as good as absent from the earlier religion of Israel..... But in the Babylonian penitential psalms of the highest antiquity (which are not annihilated by the fact that sport is made of them) the consciousness of guilt is expressed in the most affecting manner, in part in forms which remind us of the biblical Psalms. The

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<sup>1</sup> Finsler, *Darstellung und Kritik der Ansicht Wellhausen's von Geschichte und Religion des Alten Testaments* (Zürich, 1887). Notice by F. Baethgen in *Theol. Literaturzeitung*, 1887, No. 4.